

Tertullian

The Rhetorician of Carthage and the Cost of Rigor

A source-first historical biography

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1 The Christian at the Bar

Tertullian enters surviving history as an advocate. In the late second century, from Roman Carthage, he addresses governors who punish people for the name “Christian” before establishing a crime. He tests procedure, cross-examines rumor, turns Roman ideals against Roman practice, and makes a vulnerable community audible in the idiom of the tribunal. The voice is learned, comic, furious, and exact. It would help create a Latin Christian vocabulary for Trinity, person, substance, Scripture, sacrament, repentance, freedom of worship, and the resurrection of the flesh.

That achievement did not lead to a settled place among the canonized saints. The same writer increasingly demanded forms of fasting, continence, veiling, and post-baptismal purity that he believed the promised Paraclete was imposing on the Church. He invoked Montanus, Prisca, and Maximilla as prophets; called less rigorous Christians *psychici*, the merely “soulish”; and opposed what he presented as episcopal indulgence. Later Catholics mined his language while warning about his separation. His brilliance and his estrangement belong to one life.

The archive refuses an easy psychological biography. No contemporary narrator describes his childhood, conversion, office, old age, or death. Most personal evidence is the controlled self-presentation of controversial books. He addresses a wife directly, but claims about his father, presbyterate, conflict with Roman clergy, and advanced old age first appear in Jerome nearly two centuries later. The governing question is therefore not why a fully recoverable personality “became a Montanist.” It is how a married Christian intellectual in Carthage made Latin prose carry an immense vision of Church, body, truth, and discipline, and why his search for a Church incapable of compromise finally tested the communion whose rule of faith he defended.

2 Carthage and the Making of a Latin Christian Voice

2.1 A metropolis, not a provincial margin

The Carthage from which Tertullian writes was the rebuilt Roman capital of Africa Proconsularis: a Mediterranean port, administrative center, arena of imperial display, and home to schools of grammar and rhetoric. Its inhabitants moved among Latin, Greek, and Punic worlds; wealth, enslavement, patronage, trade, municipal ambition, and older regional identities occupied the same city. To call Tertullian “African” securely locates him in this province and its Christian networks. It does not by itself establish Punic or Berber ancestry, an anti-Roman national consciousness, or a single African theology. Those are modern historical proposals that must be argued from more than geography.

Christianity was present in Latin-speaking North Africa before his surviving career. The acts of the Scillitan martyrs record a proconsular hearing at Carthage on 17 July 180 in which Christians from Scillium refused sacrifice and were executed. The record is brief and stylized in transmission, but it anchors a Latin Christian community and its exposure to Roman justice. During Tertullian’s literary activity, the prison diary and martyr narrative associated with Perpetua, Felicity, and their companions place catechumens, visions, baptism, prison ministry, conflict within a family, and execution at Carthage in 202 or 203. The old suggestion that Tertullian edited the *Passion of Perpetua and Felicity* is possible literary history, not an established event in his life.

The result is a more demanding setting than the phrase “first Latin theologian” sometimes suggests. Tertullian did not invent Latin Christianity alone. He inherited communities already confessing, reading, baptizing, disciplining, and dying in Latin. What survives from him is the first large Latin Christian authorial corpus, not the first Christian thought ever formed in the language.

2.2 The adult author appears

No secure childhood scene precedes the books. Tertullian displays formidable training in rhetoric, argument, literary parody, Roman antiquarian material, philosophical schools, medicine, and legal idiom. The inference that he received an elite literary education is strong because it rests on repeated performance, not on Jerome’s later biography. It does not prove that he held a professional appointment as advocate or that he was identical with a jurist named Tertullianus cited in the *Digest*. Legal competence, a Roman law career, and residence at Rome are three different claims.

Eusebius, writing at Caesarea more than a century later, calls him especially versed in Roman laws and famous in other respects (*Ecclesiastical History* 2.2.4). Eusebius also knew a Greek translation of the *Apologeticum*, from which he quotes. That testimony proves the early Greek circulation and reputation of the African author better than it proves a lost curriculum vitae. Jerome's *On Illustrious Men* 53, written about 392 or 393, supplies the famous claim that Tertullian was the son of a *centurio proconsularis*. No earlier located witness names that father, and the phrase itself has generated competing attempts to identify an office. It belongs to received biography, not the secure childhood.

Only one part of the expansive name often printed on book covers is anchored inside an authorial work. The closing sentence of *On the Veiling of Virgins* 17 names "Septimius Tertullianus" in the third person and says the little work is his. This transmitted closing attribution is the earliest internal name form, but its syntax is not a modern signature. The fuller "Quintus Septimius Florens Tertullianus" comes through medieval paratext and manuscript titles whose forms vary. Those witnesses matter for the reception of his books; they do not all become a birth record.

2.3 Writing from a political wound

Two works allow an unusual chronological foothold. *To the Nations* 1.17.4 alludes to the defeat of Clodius Albinus, whose forces lost to Septimius Severus near Lugdunum on 19 February 197. The *Apologeticum* reworks much of the same case and is ordinarily placed later that year. These are not first drafts of a private conversion diary. They are public literary interventions by an already formed Christian writer.

Carthage had reason to feel the struggle. Albinus had drawn support in the western provinces, and imperial victory brought punishments and political realignment. Tertullian exploits memories of governors, senatorial conspiracy, imperial succession, crowd accusation, and provincial trial. The context helps explain the temperature of the prose, but it does not reduce the *Apologeticum* to partisan propaganda or prove an empire-wide program of continuous "Severan persecution." Christians were vulnerable through local accusation, judicial choice, public ritual, and intermittent coercion. The archive requires local events and legal rhetoric, not one smooth persecution timeline.

Already the durable pattern is visible. Tertullian asks institutions to become what their stated rules imply; he exposes a gap between principle and practice; and he answers ambiguity by sharpening the boundary. This made him an extraordinary advocate for Christians. It also supplied the habit by which he would later prosecute Christians who accepted disciplines he judged too easy.

3 Conversion, Household, and the Discipline of a New Life

3.1 What the convert says—and does not say

Tertullian gives no conversion narrative comparable to Justin's dialogues or Augustine's *Confessions*. In *On Repentance* 1 he speaks as one who had once been blind and without the Lord's light. In the *Apologeticum* 18.4 he contrasts inherited identity with Christian becoming: people "are made, not born, Christians." Elsewhere he includes himself within pagan spectacle, sexual sin, idolatry, and ignorance, but polemical plurals and moral exempla cannot be converted into a list of acts he personally committed.

The event is secure in the minimal sense that the mature author remembers a non-Christian past and Christian formation. Its date, agents, catechist, baptismal church, and motive are not recoverable. The attraction of martyr courage, sometimes offered as the cause, is an intelligible inference in this North African setting; Benedict XVI carefully presented it as what "seems" to have drawn him. Neither an ancient witness nor Tertullian supplies the decisive scene.

His account of repentance shows how he understood conversion. *On Repentance* 4–6 treats repentance before baptism as a real alteration of will and conduct, not a tariff paid to secure washing. Baptism seals rather than licenses reform. Chapters 7–10 then describe a second, difficult repentance after baptism, including the public discipline of *exomologesis*. This early work makes demanding mercy imaginable. The later *On Modesty* will narrow the Church's authority over grave post-baptismal sins. The change is important: rigor was present early, but its ecclesiological consequences grew.

3.2 A husband writing to a wife

One biographical fact needs no later life: Tertullian was married. *To His Wife* opens with instructions intended for his wife if he should die first. In book 1 he urges her not to remarry; in book 2 he argues at minimum against marriage to a pagan. The work belongs to ancient household ethics and ascetical exhortation, but the address is not therefore fictional. Its practical detail—prayer, fasting, night observance, visiting the poor, Eucharistic practice, the suspicions of a non-Christian husband—puts Christian discipline inside a socially mixed household.

The famous final picture in *To His Wife* 2.8 imagines a marriage of two believers who share one hope, one discipline, one service, prayer, fasting, psalmody, mutual instruction, and the Eucharistic table. The passage is both a pastoral ideal and persuasion directed at a particular marital decision. It does not tell us that every feature describes Tertullian's own marriage, and his wife's name, family, children, and fate remain unrecorded. Yet it prevents the author from being reduced to an unattached polemicist. His theology of discipline was argued in the presence of a Christian spouse who would bear its consequences.

3.3 Renunciation within ordinary life

Tertullian did not picture Christian separation as flight from the city. In *Apologeticum* 42 he insists that Christians share forum, market, baths, shops, workshops, inns, fairs, ships, military camps, farms, and trades. The list is forensic—it answers the accusation that Christians are socially useless—and it should not be read as a census of universal participation. His other works prohibit trades entangled with idols, reject the theater and arena, scrutinize military service, and oppose civic honors that demand cult.

The Christian household therefore stood inside Carthage while continually sorting its practices. *On Spectacles* rejects entertainments whose institutions and passions Tertullian ties to idolatry, cruelty, and lust; chapter 19 explicitly denies that delight in another person's suffering is innocent. Its last chapter notoriously reverses the gaze and imagines joy at divine judgment upon persecutors, philosophers, actors, athletes, and rulers. The ending cannot be softened into harmless satire. It exposes the moral danger in a rhetoric that condemns the arena's cruelty while making punishment a future spectacle.

His asceticism was not yet monastic in a later institutional sense. It was a baptismal discipline of food, sex, dress, work, prayer, and public allegiance for urban Christians. Its strength was refusal to divide belief from the body. Its peril was an escalating inability to distinguish costly fidelity from the maximal rule.

4 Apology and a Public Christian Voice

4.1 Put the accusation on trial

The *Apologeticum* begins with a procedural reversal. If governors may not investigate Christians openly, Tertullian writes, ignorance itself has already condemned them. Chapters 1–2 contrast ordinary criminal inquiry with the interrogation of a Christian: accused criminals are pressed to confess, whereas Christians who confess their name are pressed to deny it. The advocate does not offer a neutral description of uniform Roman law. He assembles the most favorable norms of proof, accusation, and consistent punishment into a case against provincial practice.

He then attacks the rumors that make the name monstrous. Christians are said to kill and eat infants, commit incest in darkness, worship an ass, or adore the cross. Tertullian answers by demanding witnesses and turning the charge of cruelty toward pagan exposure, abortion, sacrifice, and arena. In chapter 9 he describes obstructing birth and killing after birth as closely joined because a human being is already in process. The passage became an important Catholic witness against abortion. Historically, it functions inside a forensic counter-accusation and a larger Christian account of creation; it is not a Roman medical statute or a complete modern bioethical argument.

Much of the work's power comes from unsafe overstatement made memorable. In chapter 37 Christians supposedly fill cities, islands, forts, towns, councils, camps, tribes, companies, palace, senate, and forum; if they withdrew, the empire would be shocked by solitude. This is numerical rhetoric, not a census. The same passage matters because Tertullian imagines that Christians could have answered violence with numbers but instead accept death. The claim witnesses a Christian ideal of non-retaliation without proving how every Christian or soldier acted.

4.2 Loyal without worship

Chapters 30–33 state the political bargain Tertullian believes truth permits. Christians pray to the true God for the emperor’s long life, secure rule, faithful household, brave armies, loyal senate, upright people, and a peaceful world. They cannot call the emperor a god or sacrifice to him. Prayer is not withdrawal from public concern; it fixes a limit on public allegiance.

The distinction lets Tertullian claim that Christians are among the empire’s best subjects precisely because they deny imperial divinity. It also leaves a real question about coercive service. *Apologeticum* 42 includes military camps among the places Christians share. *On the Crown* 11 later argues that the military oath, idol-bearing offices, guard duties, punishment, and killing are incompatible with Christian baptism. The texts may address different questions or reflect a developing judgment, but neither should be silenced to make him a simple patron either of Christian soldiering or of a fully articulated pacifist program.

In *To Scapula* 2, addressed to the proconsul of Africa, Tertullian says it belongs to human law and natural power that each worship according to conviction; one person’s religion neither harms nor helps another, and religion ought not compel religion. The sentence is a major ancient argument against coerced worship. Its conceptual world is not a modern constitutional order of equal citizenship and religious rights. Tertullian defends Christians within an imperial society and does not here construct a general law for every later church–state settlement.

The date of *To Scapula* is unusually controlled. Chapter 3 recalls a recent solar eclipse ordinarily identified with that visible in Africa on 14 August 212. Chapter 5 warns that if Scapula proceeds, thousands of Christians of every age and rank may present themselves. Like the crowding language of the *Apologeticum*, mass self-presentation is a strategy of deterrence, not a membership return. It nonetheless shows a writer prepared to place community solidarity before a governor by name.

4.3 An assembly described for outsiders

The best-known social portrait appears in *Apologeticum* 39. Christians meet as a body, pray for rulers and public welfare, read sacred writings, receive exhortation and correction, and are presided over by approved elders whose position rests on tested character rather than purchase. A monthly gift, freely offered, supports burial, the poor, orphans, elderly people, shipwrecked persons, and those imprisoned or exiled for confession. A common meal is governed by prayer and restraint. Pagans are made to exclaim, in Tertullian’s report, “See how they love one another.”

This chapter is invaluable and interested. An apologist selects practices that answer accusations of conspiracy, criminal finance, and illicit banquet. His portrait should not be expanded into a complete constitution of every African church. It does, however, place Scripture, moral scrutiny, trustworthy presiders, voluntary giving, care for prisoners, prayer, and table fellowship within one public account. The Church is visible as a disciplined body before Tertullian begins to dispute who may exercise its power of forgiveness.

4.4 Nature, philosophy, and martyr blood

In chapter 17 the human soul, startled by God, is “naturally Christian” (*anima naturaliter Christiana*). Tertullian does not mean that baptism, revelation, or conversion is unnecessary. The phrase advances an apologetic claim that spontaneous human speech bears witness to one God beneath cultural idolatry. Chapter 46 then places Christian truth against the contradictions and moral failures of philosophical schools. His criticism is intense, yet his own arguments everywhere engage Stoic categories, rhetorical education, medicine, and Roman jurisprudence. Opposition to “philosophy” was itself philosophically equipped.

The final defiance is often misquoted. *Apologeticum* 50.13 says, in effect, that Christian blood is seed: executions multiply the movement because the condemned endurance provokes inquiry. The familiar expansion “the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church” is a later English maxim, not the exact Latin sentence. Tertullian’s claim is again apologetic causation, not a promise that every act of persecution mechanically produces conversion. Its biographical force is larger. The advocate understands truth as something proved not only by syllogism but by a body that refuses to save itself through false worship.

5 The Church at Worship: Water, Bread, Prayer, and Custom

5.1 A baptismal body

On Baptism is the earliest surviving Latin treatise devoted to baptism. It answers Christians unsettled by the apparent simplicity of water and by a woman teacher whom Tertullian calls a viper of the Cainite heresy. The insult belongs to his polemic; the existence of doctrinal argument around baptism is the historical setting. Chapters 3–5 move through creation, the Spirit over the waters, pagan washings, and biblical types. The material element is not too low for God. The whole treatise anticipates his larger defense of flesh.

Chapter 4 describes prayer invoking God over the water and the Spirit’s sanctifying action. Chapters 6–8 move from profession under the threefold name through emergence from the water, anointing, imposition of the hand, and invocation or reception of the Holy Spirit. Chapter 13 relates the command of Matthew 28:19 to the Trinitarian name. Tertullian’s arrangement is a precious witness to African Christian initiation, but his theological exposition is not a verbatim service book. Words, ministers, and order must not be standardized beyond what he actually reports.

His practical judgments are equally revealing. Chapter 17 assigns ordinary authority to baptize to the bishop, then presbyters and deacons with his permission, while allowing lay baptism in necessity. Tertullian immediately restricts that concession: emulation of episcopal office breeds schism, and women may not baptize. He rejects an appeal to the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* by reporting that an Asian presbyter confessed to composing the work out of love for Paul and was removed. The anecdote is early reception of that text; it is not surviving trial minutes and does not settle every part of the work’s composition.

Chapter 18 counsels delay where candidates lack maturity, explicitly mentioning little children and unmarried people vulnerable to temptation. The passage is evidence that the baptism of children was known and debated; it is not proof that all African churches delayed it or that Tertullian denied baptismal grace. His fear is grave post-baptismal sin. Chapter 19 prefers Passover and the period through Pentecost as especially fitting times but states that every day belongs to the Lord and baptism may be celebrated at any time. Chapter 20 calls for prayer, fasting, vigils, confession, and humility before and after the water.

Chapter 16 adds “baptism of blood”: martyrdom can supply the washing not received or restore what was lost. The language binds sacrament, confession, and body; it also helps explain why compromised post-baptismal life appeared so terrible to him. What persecution could seal at the cost of blood, ordinary leniency must not cheapen.

5.2 Inherited actions and unwritten reasons

On the Crown 3 gives a compact list of Christian practices: renunciation of the devil before baptism, triple immersion, responses somewhat fuller than the Gospel wording, tasting milk and honey, abstaining from the daily bath for a week, receiving the Eucharist before dawn and only from the hands of presiders, annual offerings for the dead, refusal to kneel on Sunday and during Pentecost, and tracing the sign of the cross repeatedly in daily life. Chapter 4 says no written law from Scripture can be produced for every such act; custom confirmed by tradition and supported by faith governs them.

The passage became a classic witness for tradition. It must be read at the scale of its argument. Tertullian is defending an unwritten refusal to wear a military crown by analogy with recognized ecclesial customs. He establishes that these practices were persuasive examples in his circle. He does not provide the date of their origin, prove that every church practiced every item, or grant later customs automatic immunity from judgment. Nor does his appeal to tradition cancel his frequent demand that customs be tested by truth.

The noun *sacramentum* in Tertullian can mean oath, sacred bond, divine plan, or a Christian rite according to context. Its use helped furnish later Latin sacramental vocabulary, but it is anachronistic to import a complete medieval sacramental system into every occurrence. His evidence is especially valuable when work, locus, and action are named rather than when one technical word is made to carry centuries of development.

5.3 Prayer through the day

On Prayer 1 calls the Lord's Prayer a summary of the whole Gospel. The treatise moves clause by clause and then into bodily and communal practice. Chapter 6 reads the petition for daily bread both ordinarily and with reference to Christ and the Eucharist. Chapter 23 defends standing rather than kneeling on the Lord's Day and during the paschal season; chapter 25 recognizes customary hours of prayer, especially the third, sixth, and ninth, while making prayer at the beginning and end of day fundamental. Chapter 27 mentions a psalm after common prayer. Chapters 28–29 present prayer from a chaste body and innocent soul as the spiritual sacrifice God desires.

These instructions make early Christian prayer embodied: washed hands do not replace moral innocence; an ostentatious voice does not compel God; dress, kiss, posture, time, psalm, and household relation all matter. They also expose contested practice. The treatise is an argument within worship, not a camera placed unnoticed in a universally uniform liturgy.

5.4 Bread, body, and a prophet's report

Against Marcion, Tertullian insists that Christ at the supper made the bread his body, describing it as a figure of his body (*Against Marcion* 4.40). The sentence has been enlisted in later contests between “symbol” and “real presence.” Tertullian's target is docetism: a figure of the body presupposes a true body capable of being represented. His Eucharistic sign and his realism work together. The passage is an anti-Marcionite argument, not a complete account of later Catholic Eucharistic doctrine.

On the Soul 9 preserves a rarer scene. A Christian woman endowed with revelatory gifts receives visions during the Sunday rites amid Scripture, psalms, preaching, and prayer; after the people are dismissed, what she saw is reported and examined. Tertullian uses her vision as evidence for the soul's corporeality. A visionary report cannot prove the ontology he derives from it. Historically, however, the scene shows prophecy neither wholly private nor simply sovereign: it occurs within assembly and is tested afterward. The woman whose speech supplies theological evidence will complicate Tertullian's severe limits on women's teaching and ministry.

Across these works the Church is not an abstraction. It washes, anoints, imposes hands, tastes, eats, stands, kneels, fasts, sings, signs the body, tests speech, gives alms, and remembers the dead. That density is one reason Tertullian survived even where his later conclusions did not. He makes ancient Christian life visible precisely because every bodily practice can become an argument.

6 Scripture, Rule of Faith, and Rival Christianities

6.1 Before the disputed text comes the apostolic Church

On the Prescription of Heretics is less a commentary than a challenge to jurisdiction. A Roman legal prescription could stop a case before its merits were tried. Tertullian likewise asks why teachers outside apostolic communion may claim the Church's Scriptures and rearrange them against the rule by which the Church received them. Chapters 19–21 move from Christ to apostles, apostolic preaching, and churches founded by or joined to them. Chapter 32 challenges rival communities to display the succession and original of their episcopal chairs. Chapter 36 points readers toward apostolic churches and celebrates Rome's witness.

This is neither a modern archival proof nor the doctrine that no biblical argument matters. Tertullian uses historical continuity, public teaching, shared rule, and scriptural custody against schools he believes manufacture private systems. When chapter 36 speaks of “authentic writings” read in apostolic churches, the phrase concerns authoritative texts in their ecclesial homes; it should not be inflated into a claim that first-century autograph manuscripts still sat in each chair.

Chapter 13 states a rule of faith: one God, creator of the world through his Word; the Word sent into the Virgin, born as Jesus Christ, crucified, raised, taken into heaven, seated at the Father's right hand, sending the Holy Spirit, and coming to receive the saints into eternal life and judge the wicked with the restoration of the flesh. The rule is narrative and baptismal before it is a catalog of technical terms. It gives Tertullian a boundary within which he

will argue fiercely and, in *On the Veiling of Virgins* 1, distinguish unchangeable faith from disciplines capable of development under the Paraclete.

6.2 Athens and Jerusalem in context

Chapter 7 asks, “What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?” The maxim is often made into Tertullian’s rejection of all reason, learning, or philosophy. Its immediate targets are philosophical genealogies assigned to heresies and a curiosity that refuses the received Christ. The author making the attack uses Stoic physics, dialectic, rhetorical classification, medicine, etymology, and law across his corpus. The tension is real but more fruitful than the slogan: he distrusts philosophy as an alternative authority while repeatedly making its instruments serve ecclesial argument.

The same control applies to his confidence that searching has an end. The prescription does not end all interpretation; Tertullian’s books are evidence of relentless interpretation. It ends a search imagined as permanent instability after the apostolic rule has been found. His later appeal to new prophetic discipline will test how fixed teaching and continuing divine speech can coexist.

6.3 Marcion and the archive of an opponent

No rival occupied Tertullian longer than Marcion. Across five books *Against Marcion* defends the unity of the creator and the Father of Jesus, the continuity of law, prophets, Gospel, and apostle, the goodness of flesh, and the identity of Christ. Books 4 and 5 follow Marcion’s gospel and Pauline collection closely enough to make Tertullian an indispensable witness to Marcionite Scripture.

Indispensable does not mean transparent. Tertullian quotes, paraphrases, accuses, and arranges an opponent’s text in order to defeat it. Modern reconstruction must compare every hostile witness and textual form; his five books are not a photographed Marcionite Bible. His repeated charge that Marcion “mutilated” Luke also assumes the priority and integrity of the ecclesial form he knows. The polemic is evidence for competing textual histories, not the final critical demonstration of their sequence.

The opening of book 1 makes the author’s own revision history unusually visible. Tertullian says an early work against Marcion was composed too hastily, that a second form was lost to him when a later apostate fraudulently copied and circulated it, and that the present work was expanded anew. The notice warns against speaking of a Tertullianian “book” as if one edition left his desk and never changed. Polemic, betrayal, authorial enlargement, copying, and later manuscript loss all stand between argument and reader.

6.4 A canon still visible in argument

Tertullian’s corpus supplies early evidence for Latin biblical reception, but not one detached canon table. *On the Apparel of Women* 1.3 defends Enoch as useful to Christians. He acknowledges that it was not received in the Jewish scriptural instrument known to him, then polemically explains that rejection by the book’s witness to Christ. His adversarial explanation is not a neutral history of canon and cannot erase the diverse Jewish reception of Enochic writings. *On Modesty* 10 rejects the *Shepherd* as an adulterers’ scripture, while chapter 20 attributes Hebrews to Barnabas and reasons from it. *On Baptism* 17 rejects the use made of the *Acts of Paul and Thecla*. These decisions arise within disputes over dress, absolution, and ministry. They show boundaries being defended and contested, not a private author issuing an ecumenical canon.

His citations are also major witnesses to the Old Latin Bible. Sometimes he appears to quote a received Latin form; sometimes he renders Greek freely, adapts wording to syntax or argument, or cites from memory. A modern reader cannot identify “Tertullian’s Bible” by back-translating every Latin sentence as though it came from one codex. Critical editions and the *Vetus Latina* apparatus are needed to distinguish textual witness from authorial handling.

6.5 The adversarial manufacture of “Jew”

The work transmitted as *Against the Jews* argues that the Gentiles have received God’s law and promises in Christ, reads Daniel’s weeks, and treats circumcision, Sabbath, sacrifice, and covenant typologically or supersessionistically.

Chapters 9–14 substantially overlap *Against Marcion* book 3, and the unity, completion, and authorship of that range remain disputed. It should not be cited as an evenly secure single composition.

The rhetoric is historically consequential even where authorship is secure. Tertullian makes “the Jews” a theological opponent within Christian claims to Israel’s Scripture. Polemical representation cannot substitute for description of diverse Jewish people in Roman Africa or elsewhere. Recent scholarship, including Stéphanie Binder’s study of Jews in Tertullian’s literary imagination, emphasizes that his portrayals shift with genre and target rather than reproducing one social encounter. The Christian continuity he defends with Israel’s Scriptures must therefore be narrated alongside the harm made possible when a rhetorical adversary becomes an undifferentiated people.

Tertullian’s scriptural achievement and failure meet here. He refuses a Gospel cut loose from creation, Israel, flesh, and public apostolic memory. Yet his boundary-making can make living opponents exist only as exhibits inside the Christian case. Source-first admiration cannot keep the first fact and hide the second.

7 Flesh, Soul, and Trinity

7.1 The hinge of salvation

Tertullian’s most coherent theological instinct is that the God who creates does not save by evading creation. *On the Resurrection of the Flesh* 8.2 compresses the claim into a wordplay: the flesh is the hinge of salvation (*caro salutis est cardo*). The body is washed so that the soul may be cleansed, anointed so that the soul may be consecrated, signed, overshadowed by the laying on of hands, fed on Christ’s body and blood, and joined to the soul’s service. Chapter 63 insists that the flesh itself, not a substitute body or a merely spiritual residue, rises.

The argument answers pagan contempt for the body and Christian teachings that divide the high God from matter. It also integrates worship and doctrine: the same flesh baptized, disciplined, tempted, persecuted, and buried must share the promised life. The formula cannot make every detail of Tertullian’s eschatology later Catholic doctrine. It explains why later Catholic readers could receive him so gratefully even while rejecting other judgments.

7.2 The paradox that was not *credo quia absurdum*

On the Flesh of Christ opposes attempts to make Christ’s body heavenly, phantasmal, or otherwise untouched by ordinary human generation. In chapter 5.4 Tertullian piles paradox on scandal: the crucified Son of God is not a cause of shame; his death is credible because it is unfitting; his burial and resurrection are certain because impossible. The wording has been reduced to “I believe because it is absurd.” That sentence is not in the text, and the reduction mistakes rhetoric for a theory of irrational faith.

Tertullian’s target is a theology that rejects an event because divine dignity could not endure the indignity of flesh. His paradox claims that the Gospel’s offense is not improved by docetic plausibility. He then argues at length from Scripture, grammar, physiology, and adversarial consistency. The performance may be vulnerable to circularity, but it is anything except refusal to reason.

Chapters 17–23 defend Christ’s real derivation from Mary and his virginal conception. Yet chapter 23 distinguishes virginity with respect to a man from virginity with respect to childbirth. *Against Marcion* 4.19 also treats Jesus’ mother and brothers in a way later readers found incompatible with perpetual virginity. Jerome, arguing against Helvidius in the late fourth century, dismisses Tertullian’s authority with the statement that he “did not belong to the Church.” That late polemical judgment is not a contemporary report, but it shows why Tertullian could be received selectively. He is an important witness to the real flesh and virginal conception of Christ, not a witness to every later Marian formulation.

7.3 A corporeal soul

In *On the Soul* 5–9 Tertullian argues that the soul is a body of its own kind: invisible to ordinary eyes yet having form, boundary, and substance. He draws extensively on Stoic categories, medicine, dream and vision, and a claim that

whatever exists is bodily in some sense. Chapter 9 invokes the woman visionary who saw a soul as delicate, luminous, human-shaped, and colored. Her report is a datum within his community; his ontology remains an argument.

Chapters 19–27 oppose Platonic pre-existence and develop a traducian account in which soul and body are propagated together from parents. Chapters 39–41 connect that propagation with inherited moral damage while preserving the unity of the person. The argument also produced concepts later Christian thinkers would not simply adopt. “Materialist” is too blunt if it implies modern reductive physicalism; “immaterial” is equally misleading if it erases his repeated claim that the soul is corporeal.

Tertullian nevertheless defends moral agency. Against astral fate and systems that make the creator responsible for evil, he insists that rational creatures can obey or refuse. His severe account of discipline presupposes the will he addresses. The tension is not between a body that determines and a soul that is free. It is between created embodied freedom, inherited disorder, demonic and social pressure, and a judgment in which the complete person answers.

7.4 One God, three who are distinct

Against Praxeas is Tertullian’s most influential contribution to Trinitarian vocabulary. Its opponent protects divine unity by identifying Father and Son so closely that, in Tertullian’s caricature, the Father himself is born and suffers. Chapter 2 confesses one God while setting out a Trinity (*trinitas*) of Father, Son, and Spirit: three not in condition but degree, not in substance but form, not in power but aspect, yet of one substance, condition, and power because one God. “Person,” “substance,” “economy,” and “Trinity” here became raw material for later Latin theology.

The achievement needs three controls. First, Tertullian is the earliest surviving Latin writer to use this technical cluster, not demonstrably the inventor of every word. Second, third-century legal, rhetorical, and metaphysical ranges of *persona* and *substantia* cannot simply be replaced by their later conciliar precision. Third, some of his analogies and ordering sound subordinationist to later ears. Historical importance does not make a pre-Nicene text secretly Nicene in every proposition.

Chapters 8–9 use source and river, root and shoot, sun and ray. The Son comes forth without separating from the divine source. Tertullian can call the Father the whole substance and the Son a derivation or portion while insisting that both remain one. The analogies make distinction intelligible and expose the limits of his formulation. They should not be isolated from the scriptural argument or promoted into an independent diagram of God.

Chapters 25–26 join Father, Son, and Spirit to baptismal command and the Paraclete’s mission. Chapter 27 says Christ is one person in whom two substances or sets of properties, divine and human, remain. Chapters 29–30 distinguish the impassible Father from the Son who truly suffers in the flesh. These are major antecedents to later two-nature Christology. They are not the Definition of Chalcedon written two centuries early: vocabulary, disputed questions, and conciliar authority differ.

Nor can the work be detached from Tertullian’s prophetic allegiance. The first chapter accuses Praxeas both of expelling prophecy and importing error about the Godhead; the later chapters give the Paraclete an active role in leading the Church into truth. Modern attempts to save the Trinitarian theologian by discarding the New Prophecy adherent split an argument Tertullian himself made whole. His theology of distinction and his theology of continuing revelation grew together, even when the latter helped estrange him from other Christians.

8 The New Prophecy and the Cost of Rigor

8.1 No single conversion in 207

Older biographies often divide the corpus into Catholic works before 207 and Montanist works afterward, then supply a conversion, schism, or excommunication at the dividing line. The books do not preserve that event. They show an increasingly explicit commitment to the prophetic movement associated with Montanus, Prisca, and Maximilla; they do not give the day Tertullian joined a separate institution, the act by which a bishop expelled him, or one uncontested chronology of every work.

“New Prophecy” is the most responsible historical name for the movement’s own claim. “Montanism” is conventional but can suggest that one founder, doctrine, and organization explain every community across Phrygia, Rome, and

Carthage. Tertullian's African reception of prophetic sayings and disciplines need not reproduce the movement's first Asian form. Opponents' reports of ecstasy, eschatology, money, women, and failed prophecy must be read beside adherents' fragments rather than fused into one hostile portrait.

Eusebius preserves the principal early anti-New-Prophecy dossier in *Ecclesiastical History* 5.16–19. He excerpts an anonymous disputant, Apollonius, Serapion, and related letters from controversies nearer the movement's Asian setting. That proximity makes the dossier indispensable; its hostile selection and Eusebius's later excerpting make it mediated evidence. Reports of ecstatic speech, money, deaths, and failed prediction are not unfiltered minutes, and none narrates Tertullian's African adherence.

The trajectory is thematic before it is calendrical. Early writings already value martyrdom, sexual restraint, fasting, public repentance, and visible separation from idols. Later writings invoke the Paraclete to intensify these practices, reject second marriage, extend fasts, enforce virginal veiling, and deny ecclesial absolution for grave sins. Prophecy did not create rigor from nothing. It gave development an authority and direction.

8.2 Faith fixed, discipline advancing

On the Veiling of Virgins 1 states the architecture clearly. The rule of faith is one, immovable, and irreformable; discipline and conduct may advance as the Paraclete leads into truth. Tertullian illustrates growth through stages of human life and divine education. The distinction allows him to deny doctrinal innovation while demanding practices his opponents regard as innovations.

That logic deserves more than retrospective dismissal. It recognizes that a living Church encounters questions not enumerated word for word in the initial rule. It also poses the decisive problem: how is genuine development discerned, and who judges a prophet's claim? Tertullian appeals to Scripture, apostolic faith, moral fruits, vision, and the promised Spirit, but his increasingly adversarial language weakens the possibility of communal correction. The Paraclete can become the warrant for the strictest available conclusion.

In *Against Praxeas* 1, Tertullian says a bishop of Rome had recognized the prophecies of Montanus, Prisca, and Maximilla and was bringing peace to the churches of Asia and Phrygia until Praxeas induced him to recall his letters. No pope is named. Attempts to identify Victor, Zephyrinus, or another bishop depend on disputed chronology. The story is partisan: it makes the theological opponent responsible for both suppressing prophecy and confusing Father and Son. It establishes Tertullian's account of a revoked Roman opening, not an independently preserved papal dossier.

The same chapter says that recognition of the Paraclete later separated "us" from the *psychici*. The Latin can mark withdrawal or division without specifying a canonical sentence. This is the strongest autobiographical notice of a breach, but it cannot supply the named judge, date, procedure, or stable denominational map that it omits.

8.3 Fasts, marriages, and a Church that may forgive

On Fasting defends additional fasts and dry-food observances against Christians who regard them as novelty or excess. Tertullian treats appetite as a school of obedience and biblical history as a pattern of restraint. His opponents' concern—that a humanly intensified discipline may be imposed as divine law—is not answered merely by the seriousness of fasting. The dispute concerns authority as much as food.

The marriage sequence is still clearer. *To His Wife* discourages a widow from remarriage. *On Exhortation to Chastity* acknowledges that a second marriage may be permitted but presses the difference between lawful and expedient. *On Monogamy*, appealing to the Paraclete, rejects second marriage as inconsistent with the final discipline. This is development in Tertullian's own terms and hardening in historical description. The reader should not collapse the three works into one timeless teaching.

The gravest contest concerns repentance. Early *On Repentance* provides for a difficult second repentance after baptism. Later *On Modesty* 1 mocks an unnamed episcopal edict granting forgiveness for adultery and fornication, calling its author the "supreme pontiff" and "bishop of bishops." Identification with Callistus of Rome is traditional but contested; some reconstructions locate the target in Carthage. The satire therefore cannot become a dated papal quotation without argument.

In chapter 21 Tertullian relocates the Church's decisive power from an institution represented by a number of bishops to the Church of the Spirit, acting through spiritual persons. He does not deny every ministry or community. He denies that bishops as such may exercise the claimed absolution. The cost of rigor is now ecclesiological: a baptismal fear of sin has become a principle by which the visible Church's mercy proves its lack of spiritual authority.

8.4 Prophecy, isolation, and the absence of an ending

Tertullian's prophetic texts preserve phenomena not reducible to stricter rules. *On the Soul* 9 values a woman's visions examined after worship; *On the Resurrection of the Flesh* and other later works attribute clarification to the Paraclete; *Against Praxeas* presents the Spirit as a teacher of Trinitarian distinction. For him the movement promised not escape from catholic faith but its eschatological maturation.

Yet the rhetoric of spiritual against soulish Christians repeatedly divides the baptized into those who can bear truth and those who compromise it. Mercy, pastoral accommodation, and institutional discernment are readily redescribed as appetite or cowardice. Tertullian's moral protest against easy Christianity remains powerful; his confidence that maximal severity identifies the Spirit does not.

Jerome later explains the break by envy and insults from the Roman clergy. That story appears in *On Illustrious Men* 53 about 180 years after Tertullian's last securely datable work, without a named source. It may preserve lost reception, but it cannot control motive. No extant work supplies a Roman clerical career whose jealous colleagues drove a disappointed presbyter away.

Nor does the archive provide a final reconciliation or dramatic apostasy. The last securely datable writing is *To Scapula* after the eclipse of 212; relative arguments place some polemics later, but no text closes the career. The voice that had demanded an open hearing from governors disappears without a trial record, deathbed, or last sentence. What remains is the breach inside the books.

9 Marriage, Women, and the Distribution of Authority

9.1 Permission becomes failure

Tertullian's thought about marriage cannot be represented by the radiant final page of *To His Wife* alone. That work's Christian couple share prayer, fasting, psalm, persecution, and Eucharist in a genuinely reciprocal spiritual life. Its purpose, however, is to prevent his widow from remarriage and at least from marriage outside the Church. The household ideal is framed by his authority to direct a wife's future after his death.

The later sequence makes continence progressively normative. In *On Exhortation to Chastity* 7–8 Tertullian knows Paul's permission of marriage but argues that permission answers weakness and is not the highest good. *On Monogamy* treats one marriage as the Christian limit, even after a spouse's death, under the Paraclete's final discipline. The argument elevates fidelity and refuses to make bodies disposable. It also converts a charism of continence into a rule capable of burdening widows and widowers whose second marriages the wider Church permitted.

The change should not be psychologized from an undocumented household crisis. Nothing records that his wife died, remarried, opposed him, or joined the New Prophecy. The documents establish an addressed wife and an increasingly severe sexual ethic. The domestic story between them is absent.

9.2 Eve's daughters and the discipline of appearance

On the Apparel of Women 1.1 addresses Christian women collectively as Eve's inheritors, the "devil's gateway" through whom the man was overcome and the image of God destroyed. The rhetoric is not a modern mistranslation or a harmless statement about Eve alone. Tertullian uses inherited blame to demand mourning, modest dress, and renunciation of ornament.

The treatise also attacks an economy of display: precious stones, cosmetics, hair, dye, and luxurious cloth carry labor, wealth, status competition, sexual presentation, and myths of fallen angels. A social critique of conspicuous consumption is present. It does not cancel the gendered humiliation by which the critique is enforced. Tertullian can

defend women's full bodily salvation and accept women's prophetic speech while still making women bear a distinct burden for temptation.

On the Veiling of Virgins contests a Carthaginian custom by which unmarried women remained unveiled in church. Tertullian argues from creation, Paul, sexual maturity, other churches, nature, and the Paraclete that virgins as women must be veiled. His opening slogan opposes truth to custom, but his own case also appeals to custom when it supports the discipline. The work makes the body publicly legible by marital and sexual status even as it claims the veil protects inward holiness from display.

9.3 Speaking prophets, barred ministers

Chapter 9 of *On the Veiling of Virgins* denies women the right to teach, dispute, baptize, offer, or claim the function of a male office, much less the priestly office. *On Baptism* 17 similarly bars women from baptism despite allowing laymen to act in necessity. These are direct restrictions, not merely later church orders attributed to him.

At the same time, *On the Soul* 9 grants evidentiary weight to a female visionary who speaks after worship, and the New Prophecy's named founding prophets include Prisca and Maximilla. Tertullian did not resolve the tension by granting women equal institutional authority. Prophecy and office occupied different channels: a woman might receive and report revelation while being barred from teaching in church and from sacramental or presiding functions. That distinction gives women real religious agency and keeps it under male interpretation.

Modern narratives sometimes recruit him either as champion of charismatic women or as an uncomplicated misogynist. Each isolates evidence. His works permit women's inspired speech, construct the Christian marriage as a shared discipline, condemn ornament economies, burden all baptized bodies with sexual restraint, blame women through Eve, and exclude them from ministries he marks male. The structure is complex without being egalitarian.

9.4 Was the rigorist a priest?

Jerome calls Tertullian a presbyter of the Church and then explains his later break. No extant work says he was ordained. Two passages sound the other way. In *On Exhortation to Chastity* 7.3 he includes himself among the laity while arguing that lay people too share priestly responsibility; in *On Monogamy* 12.2 he again opposes clergy and laity in language that places the speaker with the latter. These are rhetorical and theological self-locations, not civil certificates, but they make silent acceptance of Jerome's late title unsafe.

Eusebius, who praises Tertullian and transmits the *Apologeticum*, does not call him presbyter. Cyprian's heavy literary debt does not preserve an office. The responsible conclusion is not that ordination is impossible; it is that priesthood rests on Jerome against suggestive authorial evidence and remains doubtful.

The uncertainty matters because Tertullian writes imperiously without a secure office. His authority comes from Scripture, rule of faith, rhetorical mastery, ascetical credibility, and eventually prophecy. He can defend episcopal order against lay presumption in *On Baptism* and deny episcopal power in *On Modesty*. The movement is not necessarily a cleric surrendering his office. It is an intellectual moving the criterion of true authority toward the discipline he judges spiritual.

10 Books, Revision, and the Long Accident of Survival

10.1 A career distributed across arguments

Tertullian left more than thirty works generally received as authentic, but an exact number changes with decisions about fragments, titles, composite texts, and attribution. They range from brief addresses to five-book controversy. No ancient collected edition preserves their authorial order, and the works rarely name a year. Chronology is reconstructed from emperors and governors, eclipses, allusions among books, doctrinal vocabulary, positions on discipline, and manuscript grouping. Circular dating is a constant danger: a work should not be dated "Montanist" only because it is rigorous and then used to prove that rigor belongs to a dated Montanist phase.

The corpus includes several different acts of speech:

Work family	Representative works	Biographical and textual control
Public apologetic	<i>To the Nations, Apologeticum, To Scapula</i>	Addresses imagined pagan publics and named authority. Forensic claims, reported pagan speech, demographic boasting, and threats of mass confession are rhetoric as well as evidence.
Martyrdom and civic separation	<i>To the Martyrs, Scorpiace, On Flight in Persecution, On Idolatry, On the Crown, On Spectacles</i>	Different occasions and changing judgments about flight, service, trades, and confession must be compared rather than harmonized into a single rule.
Worship and formation	<i>On Baptism, On Prayer, On Repentance, On Patience</i>	Treatises persuade and correct actual or imagined audiences; practice described in argument is not automatically a universal ritual rubric.
Household and sexual discipline	<i>To His Wife, On the Apparel of Women, On the Veiling of Virgins, Exhortation to Chastity, On Monogamy</i>	The sequence exposes both continuity and hardening. Addresses to women and a wife are evidence of relation, not permission to invent the addressees' responses.
Rule and anti-heretical polemic	<i>Prescription against Heretics, Against Hermogenes, Against the Valentinians, Against Marcion, Against Praxeas, On the Flesh of Christ</i>	Opponents' teachings are mediated by adversarial selection. <i>Against Marcion</i> has an explicit multi-edition history; doctrinal works also respond to particular arguments rather than supplying timeless summaries.
Anthropology and resurrection	<i>On the Soul, On the Resurrection of the Flesh</i>	Scriptural exegesis is joined to Stoic, medical, philosophical, and visionary material. Later labels must preserve Tertullian's distinctive meanings.
Prophetic discipline	<i>On Fasting, On Modesty, On Monogamy</i> , and New Prophecy passages across other works	This is not a sealed late shelf: allegiance and discipline cross genres, and individual dates remain disputed.

The author is sometimes an unreliable witness against himself in a productive sense. *On Patience* 1 says he is wholly unfit to teach the virtue he does not possess and can only sigh after it like a sick person describing health. The confession is a literary humility topos and recognizable self-criticism. It establishes that Tertullian wanted readers to see the gap between teacher and achievement; it does not license a diagnosis of temperament from every insult.

10.2 Latin originality and missing Greek

The surviving corpus is overwhelmingly Latin, but Tertullian moved in a bilingual Christian intellectual world. *On Baptism* 15 refers to a fuller treatment already composed in Greek. *On the Crown* 6.3 says his related treatment of spectacles was in Greek, and *On the Veiling of Virgins* 1.1 says he had already handled that question in Greek. Those authorial Greek treatments are lost. They must be distinguished from the anonymous ancient Greek translation of the Latin *Apologeticum* used by Eusebius, whose translator and complete text do not survive. Other lost titles are known from Tertullian's cross-references or later lists, including works on ecstasy closely tied to the New Prophecy.

Counts of fifteen, eighteen, or another exact total of lost works depend on whether alternate titles, Greek versions, projected works, and fragments are separate. The responsible conclusion is qualitative: substantial parts of his Greek production, prophetic defense, and intra-Christian controversy are missing. The surviving Latin career is therefore not the whole author.

His Latin is itself difficult evidence. Tertullian compresses clauses, coins or retools terms, shifts registers from street taunt to technical argument, and exploits sounds and legal ambiguity. A smooth translation can conceal the argument; a wooden one can manufacture obscurity. Claims about the first use of a theological word require the Latin, earlier lexical record, textual variant, and sense in context.

10.3 Four corpus routes and one independent apology

No surviving manuscript is close to Tertullian's lifetime. The earliest located item is a late-eighth-century fragment of *Against the Jews* in Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, lat. 13047. The large manuscript witnesses begin still later. Most surviving copies are medieval or Renaissance, and many works depend on very few witnesses.

Modern editors describe several principal collection histories rather than one stemma for all works:

- The *Apologeticum* circulated independently and survives in more than three dozen manuscripts, with textual groupings of its own.
- The *Corpus Cluniacense* transmitted a large collection of roughly twenty-one or twenty-two works through branches often called alpha and beta. The counts and relationships vary with reconstructed archetypes and losses.
- The *Corpus Agobardinum* is represented above all by the ninth-century Codex Agobardinus. It preserves thirteen works from a larger collection and is uniquely important for several readings.
- The *Corpus Trecense* survives in a sole extant representative, the twelfth-century Troyes manuscript 523, which carries five works of Tertullian. That family-level fact does not by itself make each work a codex unicus; every treatise's other transmission must still be checked separately.
- The *Corpus Corbeiense* carried a group of major anti-heretical works. Its manuscript witnesses were lost, apart from a fragment and old collations; its reconstructed contents and readings depend partly on those indirect controls and on sixteenth-century editions made from codices no longer available.
- An Ottobonian excerpt collection and other partial witnesses preserve additional pieces. Excerpt is not the same object as a complete treatise.

These routes explain why one general statement about “the manuscripts of Tertullian” is unsafe. A richly witnessed *Apologeticum*, a sole-copy work, and a text reconstructed partly from early print do not carry the same security at every word. The printed editions of Beatus Rhenanus, Mesnart, Pamelius, and others can be textual witnesses where their exemplars vanished, even though editorial conjecture and printing error must also be controlled.

The 1954 *Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina* volumes 1–2 remain a standard compact critical corpus, but they contain work-specific editions by different editors rather than one uniform new collation. The *Sources Chrétiennes* series and other modern editions have since re-edited individual works with fuller introductions, manuscript arguments, translations, or commentary. Migne and searchable transcriptions are useful discovery tools; no critical claim should rest on their convenience alone.

10.4 Authentic, appended, attributed

The short *Against All Heresies*, often printed after *Prescription against Heretics*, is now treated as Pseudo-Tertullian. Its placement in the transmitted corpus records reception, not authorship. The verse *Poem against Marcion* and several other works transmitted under his name are likewise spurious. A maxim or theological position in one of them cannot be moved into Tertullian's biography without an attribution argument.

Attribution also fails in subtler ways. Tertullian's proposed editorship of the *Passion of Perpetua and Felicity* rests on affinities of language, martyrdom, prophecy, and the text's editorial frame. Similarity may reflect a shared Carthaginian Christian world. It does not identify an editor. The work belongs in his context and reception, not securely in his bibliography.

The uneven survival changes interpretation. A lost Greek treatise makes the Latin author seem more monolingual; lost books on ecstasy make his prophetic case look like scattered discipline; spurious anti-heretical catalogs can make his taxonomy seem larger; early print can freeze one reconstructed reading. Transmission is therefore not a technical epilogue to the life. It is one of the forces that made the Tertullian later centuries could praise or condemn.

11 Tertullian after Tertullian

11.1 Cyprian's unacknowledged master

Cyprian, bishop of Carthage from about 249 until his martyrdom in 258, is the first great evidence of Tertullian's reach. His *On the Dress of Virgins* reworks themes and language from *On the Apparel of Women*; *On the Advantage of Patience* receives Tertullian's *On Patience*; his thought about prayer, baptism, unity, and martyrdom repeatedly inhabits a Latin theological world Tertullian helped form. Influence here is established by literary comparison, not by a surviving school register.

Jerome later says that the aged Cyprian never passed a day without reading Tertullian and would ask his secretary, "Give me the master" (*On Illustrious Men* 53). Jerome attributes the report through a chain reaching a person who had known Cyprian's secretary. It is memorable early Christian oral reception recorded about 140 years after Cyprian's death. The literary debts stand without it; the anecdote makes personal reading vivid but should retain its late chain.

Cyprian's reception also shows selection. He can refine Tertullianian ascetic language while remaining an episcopal teacher of Catholic unity and reconciliation. In the controversy over the lapsed, Cyprian demanded penance against cheap peace yet opposed both indiscriminate absolution and the refusal of ecclesial restoration. Tertullian's rigor was not the only African way to take baptism and martyrdom seriously.

11.2 Praise with a warning attached

Lactantius, writing in the early fourth century, judges Tertullian learned in every kind of literature but difficult, insufficiently polished, and obscure (*Divine Institutes* 5.1). In 5.4 he nevertheless says the *Apologeticum* pleaded the Christian cause fully. The combination is important: admiration for erudition and advocacy did not require admiration for style or every conclusion.

Jerome mined the corpus, transmitted personal traditions, and used Tertullian against opponents while identifying him as one who had become a Montanist. His comments are not one stable verdict. *On Illustrious Men* preserves a great Christian writer inside literary history; *Against Helvidius* 19 invokes his ecclesial separation when Helvidius cites him against perpetual virginity. Jerome is both indispensable witness and strategic controversialist.

Vincent of Lérins in *Commonitorium* 18 creates a classic double portrait. Almost every Latin writer, he says in effect, can be surpassed in one quality, but Tertullian gathers extraordinary force of intellect, argument, memory, language, and attack. The praise turns into warning: great gifts did not keep him within the ancient and universal faith when he defended Montanus. Vincent's fifth-century lesson is theological reception, not an independent biography of the separation.

11.3 Tertullianists without Tertullian

Augustine's *On Heresies* 86, written in the 420s, says Tertullianists survived at Carthage, dwindled almost completely, then passed into the Catholic Church and handed over their basilica. He associates them with Tertullian and Montanist teaching and adds that Tertullian later formed his own conventicle. This is valuable evidence that a named group and a property memory existed in fifth-century Carthage.

It is not contemporary evidence that Tertullian founded a formally organized "Tertullianist Church" or owned the basilica two centuries earlier. Augustine does not provide its location, deed, foundation act, or continuous institutional history. The notice proves reception at the horizon of Augustine; retrospective identity must remain retrospective.

A text usually called the Gelasian Decree places the works of Tertullian among apocryphal writings to be rejected. The compilation is composite, survives in later manuscripts, and has circulated under the names of Damasus, Gelasius, and Hormisdas. Its list witnesses a Latin ecclesial boundary in late-antique or early-medieval reception. Calling every clause a securely issued decree of Pope Gelasius would overstate authorship and promulgation.

11.4 Modern recovery and historical reconstruction

Renaissance printing gathered manuscript families whose witnesses were already fragile. Early modern confessional scholars then used Tertullian's descriptions of ministry, Eucharist, tradition, penance, and Rome in arguments about the primitive Church. Because a single sentence could serve opposed programs, the author was repeatedly fragmented into proof texts.

Modern critical study rebuilt a more historical corpus. Timothy Barnes's chronological work challenged inherited dates and the easy biography drawn from Jerome. David Rankin reconsidered Tertullian's relation to the Church; Eric Osborn treated him as a creative theologian rather than a bag of Latin terms; Geoffrey Dunn integrated life, writings, and ecclesiology. David Wilhite pressed a postcolonial reading of Tertullian's African identity, provoking productive dispute over ethnicity, Roman power, and modern categories. Jared Secord's 2022 Cambridge account compresses the likely career toward a later birth and shorter writing period; other current reference works retain broader life ranges. No one reconstruction has converted the sparse biography into a civil archive.

Recent work also changes what counts as context. Studies of the New Prophecy resist a simple Catholic/Montanist binary; studies of Roman Africa recover provincial institutions without treating "Africa" as essence; studies of marriage and women distinguish charismatic speech from office; Stéphanie Binder's 2026 work re-examines the changing literary functions of Jews in the corpus. Critical progress often deepens uncertainty while making the real arguments more exact.

11.5 Selective Catholic reception

The modern Catholic Church does not receive Tertullian as a canonized saint or Doctor of the Church. It does receive particular truths he expressed. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* cites *To His Wife* 2.8 for the grace of Christian marriage (CCC 1642), *Apologeticum* 9 against abortion (CCC 2271), *Apologeticum* 50 for the missionary fruit of martyrdom (CCC 852), *On Repentance* 4 for post-baptismal conversion (CCC 1446), *On Prayer* repeatedly in its exposition of the Lord's Prayer, and *On the Resurrection of the Flesh* 1 and 8 for bodily resurrection and the flesh as the hinge of salvation (CCC 991, 1015).

It also cites *Against Marcion* for the one Creator and the character of divine law. These references are acts of selective appropriation. A citation appropriates or commends the cited wording within the Catechism's argument; it does not certify every historical premise, fix the ancient wording independently, approve the whole work, endorse its polemical portrait of Marcion, or receive Tertullian's later disciplinary claims.

Benedict XVI's general audience of 30 May 2007 gives the most sustained recent papal portrait. He praises Tertullian's decisive role in forming Latin Christian theology, his Trinitarian and Christological language, his image of the Church as mother, his defense of public Christian witness, and his insistence on the resurrection of the flesh. The catechesis then names the drama: excessive individualism and rigor drew him step by step into isolation and loss of communion. A papal audience is official catechesis, not canonization or a critical-edition judgment. Its selection nevertheless shows how Catholic memory can honor gifts without disguising rupture.

That reception is fittingly Tertullianian in one respect. It refuses to let an author's status replace argument. The Church can repeat his strongest words, reject his severity, and leave his personal end to God because the historical record does not supply it.

12 Tradition under Review

Tertullian attracted fewer miracle stories than many ancient Christian authors, but his thin biography invited a different legendary process: titles, occupations, motives, institutional breaks, and quotable sentences accumulated until modern summaries could tell a smooth life the early evidence never tells. The traditions deserve preservation because they shaped his reception. Their status must travel with them.

Tradition or familiar claim	Earliest located control	Historical status	Responsible significance
Full name “Quintus Septimius Florens Tertullianus”	“Septimius Tertullianus” occurs in the third-person closing sentence of <i>On the Veiling of Virgins</i> 17; fuller forms occur in medieval titles and paratext.	The shorter form is a transmitted internal attribution, not a modern signature; manuscript name forms are later transmission evidence.	Use “Tertullian” ordinarily and discuss expanded forms without pretending to a birth certificate.
Born about 155 or exactly 160	Calculations from an assumed career length and Jerome’s old-age notice; no ancient birth year.	Modern estimates range from the mid-second century to about 170.	Dates express a reconstruction, not a known anniversary.
Son of a proconsular centurion	Jerome, <i>On Illustrious Men</i> 53, c. 392/3.	Late received report without earlier located corroboration; office meaning is disputed.	It may preserve lost local learning but cannot carry class, ethnicity, education, or childhood by itself.
Professional advocate or Roman jurist	Legal and rhetorical performance in the works; Eusebius 2.2.4 praises knowledge of Roman law. A jurist Tertullianus appears separately in the <i>Digest</i> .	Legal expertise is strong; professional title, Roman career, and identity with the jurist are unproved.	Study the law in his arguments without manufacturing an employment record.
Long residence and conversion at Rome	Jerome’s Roman-clergy story plus modern inference from Roman material.	No self-authored journey or conversion scene establishes residence. Knowledge could travel through books and networks.	Rome is central to his ecclesial argument, not securely a biographical home.
Presbyter	Jerome, <i>On Illustrious Men</i> 53; compare Tertullian’s lay self-placement in <i>Exhortation to Chastity</i> 7.3 and <i>On Monogamy</i> 12.2.	Doubtful and internally tense.	Do not use office to explain an authority his works ground in learning, baptism, rule, and prophecy.
Cyprian’s daily “Give me the master”	Jerome 53 through a reported oral chain.	Late anecdote; broad Cyprianic literary dependence is independently strong.	It memorably represents reception without becoming proof of personal contact.
Editor of the <i>Passion of Perpetua</i>	Modern attribution from literary, thematic, and New Prophecy affinities.	Plausible hypothesis, not established authorship.	The passion illuminates the same Carthaginian martyr world even if another editor framed it.
Conversion to Montanism in 207	Modern phase schemes using relative chronology and doctrinal language.	No dated conversion act; allegiance emerges across disputed sequences.	Use trajectories and ranges rather than a false hinge.
Excommunicated by a named pope	No located ancient act. <i>Against Praxeas</i> 1 reports a division and revoked Roman peace letters but names no bishop or sentence.	Unsupported as a specific event.	His separation is real in self-description; its juridical mechanism is unknown.

Tradition or familiar claim	Earliest located control	Historical status	Responsible significance
Callistus issued the edict mocked in <i>On Modesty</i>	<i>On Modesty</i> 1 names no author; later reconstructions identify Callistus or an African bishop.	Contested.	The work securely attacks an episcopal absolution policy; name, see, and date remain open.
Founder of a separate Tertullianist basilica	Augustine, <i>On Heresies</i> 86, in the 420s, reports later Tertullianists and their basilica's transfer.	Strong for fifth-century Carthaginian reception, late for Tertullian's action.	Do not backdate a later group's institution two centuries.
"I believe because it is absurd"	Loose modern reduction of <i>On the Flesh of Christ</i> 5.4.	Not Tertullian's sentence and misleading as a theory of faith.	Quote the actual paradox in its anti-docetic argument.
"The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church"	Expansion of <i>Apologeticum</i> 50.13, <i>semen est sanguis Christianorum</i> .	Faithful popular paraphrase, not exact quotation.	Attribute exact Latin and explain the apologetic claim that execution provokes conversion.
"See how these Christians love one another"	<i>Apologeticum</i> 39 reports what pagans exclaim.	Tertullianian wording as reported outsider speech, not a neutral survey or his own direct maxim.	Retain its literary speaker and the community practices surrounding it.
Martyr, saint, feast day, tomb, relics	No controlled death, burial, early cult, liturgical feast, relic dossier, or competent canonization located in the searched records.	Unsupported; absence is bounded by the surviving and accessible record.	Do not call him Saint or invent a devotional afterlife; recognize his importance as an early Christian author.

12.1 A death without a scene

Jerome says Tertullian lived to a very advanced age, but gives no year, place, cause, final allegiance, or witness at the bed. No surviving persecution act makes him a martyr. No early burial itinerary identifies a grave. No translation of relics creates a chain of custody. Later date ranges around 220 or 225 are scholarly accommodations to literary chronology and Jerome's notice, not independently documented endpoints.

This negative result has positive historical force. Tertullian taught that the body, public confession, and final perseverance mattered absolutely, yet the record preserves neither his dying body nor his last confession. Historical writing cannot award a triumphant return, condemn a final obstinacy, or turn silence into divine judgment. His theological afterlife is exceptionally loud; his personal ending is unknown.

12.2 Why the false quotations endure

The three best-known phrases each improve Tertullian for memory. "I believe because it is absurd" makes a complex anti-docetic paradox into a manifesto of irrationalism. "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church" gives an elliptical forensic line an ecclesial subject and polished cadence. "See how they love one another" removes the phrase from an apologist's reported pagan voice and turns it into direct testimony.

The cure is not to ban the paraphrases. It is to restore work, chapter, speaker, genre, and textual form. Tertullian is more interesting when the roughness is left in place: a reasoner using impossibility as scandal, an advocate making blood into reproductive rhetoric, and a Christian author ventriloquizing the public he wants to persuade.

13 The Rhetorician and the Cost of Rigor

Tertullian's achievement begins in integration. He makes Roman law answer Christian vulnerability, makes rhetoric serve a baptismal rule, makes the material body bear theological truth, makes household conduct part of ecclesiology, and makes the Latin language risk distinctions it had not yet been asked to sustain. Creation and redemption, Christ's flesh and the believer's flesh, water and Spirit, bread and body, martyr testimony and public argument belong together. Later Western Christianity could not avoid the questions or the vocabulary.

His failures begin in the same gift. The advocate who exposes procedural inconsistency can turn every concession into hypocrisy. The theologian who refuses to let belief float above the body can measure communion by the hardest bodily rule. The defender of apostolic publicity can relocate authority toward those who recognize the prophecy he recognizes. The critic of arena cruelty can imagine judgment as spectacle; the defender of women prophets can bind women to Eve's blame; the heir of Israel's Scriptures can manufacture "the Jews" as a Christian adversary.

Rigor is not simply seriousness, and mercy is not simply relaxation. That is the unresolved moral center of his life. Tertullian correctly saw that forgiveness without conversion, worship without bodily allegiance, and communion without truth can become evasions. He did not adequately protect the opposite truths: that discipline is not validated by maximal difficulty, that the Spirit's gifts require common discernment, and that the visible Church's ministry of reconciliation is not disproved by the sinner who needs it.

No source permits a final verdict on the man. His birth household, baptismal teacher, professional post, ordination, Roman residence, steps of separation, last books, death, and grave remain partly or wholly unavailable. The gaps prevent both an edifying arc and a diagnostic one. They also concentrate attention on what survives: arguments written to change communities rather than notes written to explain their author.

Catholic reception is strongest when it follows that evidence. It need not call Tertullian a saint to thank him for language about one God in three Persons, the true flesh of Christ, baptismal formation, the Lord's Prayer, marriage, freedom from coerced worship, the resurrection of the flesh, and the seed-like witness of persecuted Christians. It need not erase those gifts to say that his prophetic certainty and disciplinary severity led into isolation.

The rhetorician of Carthage remains valuable because he will not let the reader stay comfortable. Read historically, he also cannot be allowed to control the terms of every choice. His life's archive asks for a fidelity as demanding as his own but less brittle: exact about truth, embodied in practice, open to repentance, accountable to communion, and humble before what the record—and the human heart—does not disclose.

A Scope, Chronology, and Evidence

A.1 Identity and bounds

Name. This study uses *Tertullian*, Latin *Tertullianus*, with the conventional geographical description "of Carthage." The third-person closing sentence of *On the Veiling of Virgins* 17 names "Septimius Tertullianus" and says the little work is his. This is a transmitted internal attribution, not a modern signature. The expanded "Quintus Septimius Florens Tertullianus" rests on variable medieval paratext and is not treated as a complete contemporary legal name. "Saint" is not used: no competent canonization, stable early cult, or received feast was located. "Father" may describe historical influence but is not made an ecclesial status claim.

Life range. Birth and death are unknown. Current scholarly estimates place birth variously around 150/160 or as late as about 170. By 197 he had become an educated Christian author. *To His Wife* securely establishes that he was married by that work's uncertain late-190s or early-200s composition; it does not date the wedding. *To Scapula* was written after the eclipse of 14 August 212; other works may follow, but none supplies a secure final year. Death is conventionally placed about 220 or 225, largely by fitting relative literary chronology to Jerome's late report of extreme old age. This study therefore treats *fl. c. 196/197–212 or later* as the controlled range and leaves both endpoints of the life open. Dates use proleptic Common Era.

Places and jurisdiction. Carthage in Roman Africa Proconsularis is the secure center of authorship and ecclesial life. Rome is central to several arguments and later traditions but is not a securely documented residence. Phrygia and Asia belong to the history of the New Prophecy; no journey there is claimed. Historical place names do not establish modern ethnicity or political identity. The civil setting is the Roman Empire under the Severan dynasty

and its provincial administration; the ecclesial setting is the Christian community of Carthage in relation to African, Roman, Asian, and other churches.

Language and state of life. Tertullian’s surviving corpus is Latin; he reports Greek works now lost, knew Greek Scripture and learning, and is known to Eusebius through a Greek translation of the *Apologeticum*. His biblical Latin may preserve Old Latin forms or his own renderings. He was a convert from a pagan past and a married Christian. Ordination as presbyter is Jerome’s late report and remains doubtful beside Tertullian’s lay self-placement. The corpus shows explicit adherence to the New Prophecy and a breach with Christians he calls *psychici*; it does not preserve a dated institutional transfer or named excommunication.

A.2 Reader, question, and thesis boundary

The intended reader is a serious general reader, cleric, student, or researcher who needs one sustained life without a fabricated chronology. The governing question is how a married Christian intellectual in Carthage made Latin prose carry an integrated theology of Church, body, truth, and discipline, and why his confidence that the Paraclete demanded increasing rigor led toward isolation.

The historical thesis is that Tertullian’s achievement and estrangement grew from related habits: material and linguistic exactness, refusal of divided allegiance, adversarial boundary-making, and insistence that belief take bodily form. The publication does not diagnose his personality, settle his eternal state, decide every work date, reconstruct a lost Marcionite Bible, issue an ecclesial judgment, or turn later Catholic citation into approval of the whole corpus.

Included are the controlled life, Carthaginian setting, principal works by genre and development, apologetics, worship, Scripture and rule of faith, Trinitarian and Christological language, anthropology and resurrection, marriage and gender, New Prophecy allegiance, ministry and absolution dispute, manuscript survival, spuria and lost works, ancient and Catholic reception, and memorable traditions. Excluded are a line-by-line commentary on every treatise, complete critical-edition collation, full *Vetus Latina* citation inventory, exhaustive social histories of African Christianity, Marcion, or the New Prophecy, and unsupported cult or relic claims.

A.3 Evidence key

Code	Meaning
A	Subject-authored evidence in Tertullian’s works, controlled by genre, audience, revision, relative date, and manuscript transmission. Self-reference remains literary self-presentation rather than a neutral file.
N	Contemporary or near-contemporary external witness, such as the African martyr records or early literary reception. Proximity does not make one author eyewitness to Tertullian.
E	Early received tradition, especially Eusebius, Lactantius, Jerome, Augustine, and Vincent; it establishes early memory and sometimes preserves lost reports without becoming contemporary biography.
L	Later manuscript, devotional, visual, local, or popular tradition, including expanded names, quotations, and inferred occupations. It is evidence first for its transmitting period.
M	Official ecclesial reception, limited to the act’s object: for example a Catechism citation or papal catechesis, neither of which canonizes the author or approves every work.
K	Named modern critical reconstruction, with premises and alternatives exposed; this includes chronology, ethnicity, institutional status, opponent identification, attribution, and manuscript relationships.
S	Source-grounded synthesis by this publication, never attributed to an ancient witness.

A.4 Detailed chronology

Date	Place	Event and evidence	Status
17 July 180	Carthage	Scillitan Christians are tried by the proconsul and executed. This anchors a Latin African Christian setting before Tertullian's corpus, not his presence.	N; contextual event
c. 155–170	Unknown; Africa often inferred	Possible birth range derived from competing modern career chronologies. No ancient birth date or secure birthplace survives.	K; broad and disputed
before 197	Probably Carthage	Literary education and Christian adherence precede the surviving public apologetic. The human agents, place, date, and sequence of conversion and baptism remain unknown.	A/K; states strong, dates open
19 February 197 and after	Carthage	<i>To the Nations</i> alludes to the defeat of Clodius Albinus; the <i>Apologeticum</i> substantially reworks the case and is commonly dated later in 197.	A/K; unusually strong terminus
late 190s–early 200s	Carthage	Early apologetic, moral, and catechetical works usually include <i>To the Martyrs</i> , <i>On Spectacles</i> , <i>On Prayer</i> , <i>On Baptism</i> , <i>On Repentance</i> , and <i>To His Wife</i> ; their internal order varies by reconstruction. <i>To His Wife</i> securely establishes marriage by its composition, not a wedding date.	A/K; family and sequence approximate
202/203	Carthage	Perpetua, Felicity, and companions are imprisoned and martyred. Tertullian's editorship of their <i>Passion</i> is a modern hypothesis.	N; context secure, attribution K
late second–early third century	Asia Minor / later transmission	The hostile New Prophecy materials excerpted in Eusebius <i>Ecclesiastical History</i> 5.16–19 arise nearer the Asian controversy. They do not narrate Tertullian's African adherence.	E; early fragments in a hostile, mediated dossier
early 200s	Carthage	Anti-heretical work expands: <i>Prescription against Heretics</i> , works against Hermogenes and the Valentinians, and successive forms of <i>Against Marcion</i> . Exact dating depends on cross-reference and doctrinal sequence.	A/K; relative
first decade of third century	Carthage	<i>Against Marcion</i> passes through the author-described hurried first work, illicitly circulated second form, and expanded extant recension.	A; stages secure, dates K
c. 207–212 or later	Carthage	Works increasingly invoke the Paraclete and New Prophecy in disputes over veiling, fasting, marriage, forgiveness, Christology, and ecclesial authority. No single conversion year controls the transition.	A/K; allegiance secure, chronology disputed
c. 208–213 or later	Carthage	Major theological works commonly placed in this mature period include <i>On the Soul</i> , <i>On the Flesh of Christ</i> , <i>On the Resurrection of the Flesh</i> , and <i>Against Praxeas</i> . Individual ranges and order remain contested.	A/K; broad placement
14 August 212 and after	Carthage	The eclipse recalled in <i>To Scapula</i> controls its date; Tertullian warns the proconsul against coercion and persecution.	A/K; strong terminus
after 212	Carthage presumed	<i>On Monogamy</i> , <i>On Fasting</i> , and <i>On Modesty</i> are ordinarily among the late rigorist works. Their dates and the identity of the bishop mocked in <i>On Modesty</i> remain open.	A/K; relative
after 212; often c. 220–225	Unknown	Death. Jerome says only that Tertullian lived to advanced old age. No controlled cause, place, final communion, burial, or cult record survives.	E/K; endpoint unknown

Date	Place	Event and evidence	Status
c. 249–258	Carthage	Cyprian’s writings receive Tertullian’s language and themes while placing rigor within Catholic episcopal communion.	N/E; literary dependence strong
early fourth century	Roman Empire	Lactantius praises Tertullian’s learning and apologetic completeness while criticizing his obscurity and polish.	E; direct literary reception
early fourth century	Caesarea	Eusebius transmits a Greek translation of the <i>Apologeticum</i> and calls Tertullian learned in Roman law.	E; reputation, not career record
c. 392/393	Bethlehem	Jerome’s <i>On Illustrious Men</i> 53 records presbyterate, centurion father, Roman envy, Montanist breach, Cyprianic anecdote, and old age.	E; indispensable late biography
420s	North Africa	Augustine reports surviving Carthaginian Tertullianists, their dwindling return to Catholic communion, and transfer of a basilica.	E; fifth-century group
c. 434	Gaul	Vincent of Lérins praises Tertullian’s Latin genius and makes his later error a warning against private novelty.	E; received evaluation
late eighth century	Frankish realm / Paris witness	Earliest located surviving manuscript item: fragment of <i>Against the Jews</i> , now BnF lat. 13047.	L/K; material transmission
ninth–twelfth centuries	Western Europe	BnF lat. 1622, the Codex Agobardinus, and Troyes 523 preserve distinct corpus routes. Troyes 523 is the sole extant representative of the Trecense family and carries five Tertullian works; that does not make it the sole witness to each work.	L/K; manuscript evidence
sixteenth century	Basel, Paris, and other print centers	Early printed editions gather the corpus and preserve readings from Corbie manuscripts subsequently lost.	L/K; edition history
1954	Turnhout	<i>Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina</i> volumes 1–2 publish the principal modern collected critical corpus with work-specific editors.	K; critical-edition milestone
30 May 2007	Vatican City	Benedict XVI praises Tertullian’s Latin theological contribution and identifies rigorist isolation as the drama of his life.	M; papal catechesis
2026	International scholarship	Binder’s study of Jews in Tertullian’s literary imagination and other current work continue revision of identity, rhetoric, chronology, and reception.	K; mutable scholarship

A.5 Chronology controls and competing reconstructions

The chronology does not derive from a dated ancient life. It combines three harder anchors—the Albinus allusion after 19 February 197, the eclipse after 14 August 212, and authorial cross-references—with relative development, historical names, adversarial targets, and style. The order of the three forms of *Against Marcion* is author-attested; their exact years are not. The place of *Against Praxeas*, *On the Crown*, *On Flight*, *Scorpiace*, *On the Resurrection of the Flesh*, and the rigorist works varies among modern tables.

Timothy Barnes’s historical revision remains foundational but has itself been revised. Older tables often begin life around 155/160 and extend writing or life into the 220s. Jared Secord argues for a birth perhaps around 170 and a compact literary career roughly 196–212. Current reference works continue to print broader ranges. This study does not force apparent theological change to yield one exact calendar. Local passages retain their event dates; the appendix owns the disputed whole-life ranges.

A.6 Corpus and method

The principal subject-authored corpus inspected includes *To the Nations*, *Apologeticum*, *To Scapula*, *To the Martyrs*, *On Spectacles*, *On Idolatry*, *On the Crown*, *Scorpiace*, *On Flight in Persecution*, *On Baptism*, *On Prayer*, *On Repentance*, *On Patience*, *To His Wife*, *On the Apparel of Women*, *On the Veiling of Virgins*, *Exhortation to Chastity*, *On Monogamy*, *Prescription against Heretics*, *Against Hermogenes*, *Against the Valentinians*, *Against Marcion*, *Against Praxeas*, *On the Flesh of Christ*, *On the Soul*, *On the Resurrection of the Flesh*, *On Fasting*, and *On Modesty*. *Against the Jews* is used with its unity and chapters 9–14 qualified. Spurious and lost works are not silently merged into this corpus.

External controls include the Acts of the Scillitan Martyrs, *Passion of Perpetua and Felicity*, Eusebius’s hostile and excerpted New Prophecy dossier in *Ecclesiastical History* 5.16–19, his other Tertullian notices, Lactantius, Jerome, Augustine, Vincent of Lérins, the composite Gelasian dossier, manuscript catalogs, and the publication history of early editions. Official Catholic reception is limited to the Catechism’s actual citations and Benedict XVI’s catechesis. Modern controls include Barnes, Rankin, Osborn, Dunn, Trevett, Wilhite, Secord, Storin and Muehlberger, Binder, current critical editions, and manuscript and Vetus Latina research tools.

Every consequential biographical claim was tested first against Tertullian’s own corpus and the earliest reasonably accessible external witness, then against genre, opponent, textual locus, relative chronology, transmission, and named modern reconstruction. Self-authored evidence establishes what the work says and how the author presents himself; it does not make polemic a neutral transcript. A late source may preserve a lost report, but its parts are disaggregated rather than accepted as a package. Official reception establishes what the authority selected, not a total verdict on the author.

The negative search specifically sought contemporary biography; a birth, baptism, ordination, excommunication, death, burial, relic, feast, or cult record; a named Roman bishop’s act; a legal career record; secure identity with the *Digest* jurist; and a controlled editorial notice for the Perpetua passion. No such record was located. This is a bounded result from the reasonably accessible corpus, ancient reception, catalogs, and current scholarship, not proof that no lost record ever existed.

Internet-accessible sources and mutable institutional records were last checked through 2026-07-19. Manuscript counts, catalog descriptions, critical editions, and current scholarly judgments remain subject to revision.

A.7 Limits, rights, and review state

This release completed internal historical, theological, chronological, transmission, tradition, and Catholic-reception audits at publication scale. Independent patristic, textual-critical, theological, rights, and editorial review remains outstanding. The internal work did not collate every manuscript, verify every Latin biblical citation against the complete Vetus Latina apparatus, inspect every modern copyrighted edition in full, reconstruct all opponents from independent sources, or conduct an exhaustive archaeological and epigraphic survey of Roman Carthage. No conclusion requiring those reviews is represented as established.

Ancient Latin and Greek are public domain. Public-domain ANF and NPNF research translations are cited and mostly paraphrased, with brief wording tied to exact loci. Modern translations, critical editions, scholarship, Vatican English, catalog metadata, and manuscript images retain their respective rights; online access does not imply permission to reproduce. No third-party image appears. This publication’s original prose falls under the repository license, while third-party source material remains outside it. The document-wide compact reuse notice appears as the final-page colophon after generation metadata.

B References

B.1 Tertullian’s works actually inspected

The Latin loci were controlled through modern critical texts where a lexical or textual claim mattered. The linked nineteenth-century *Ante-Nicene Fathers* (ANF) translations are public-domain research aids, not controlling editions. Their chapter divisions and wording were checked against the work and are cited here so a reader can inspect the passages without implying that one old English version resolves the Latin.

- Tertullian. *Apologeticum*, especially 1–2, 9, 17–18, 30–33, 37, 39, 42, 46, and 50. ANF vol. 3 research translation, New Advent text; accessed 2026-07-19. Latin controlled through Eligius Dekkers et al., eds., *Tertulliani Opera*, CCSL 1 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1954), and the critical tradition described below. Reported pagan speech, rhetorical demographics, and the compressed Latin of 17.6 and 50.13 remain marked.
- Tertullian. *Ad nationes*, especially 1.1–7 and 1.17.4 (the Albinus allusion); and *Ad Scapulam*, especially 2–5. Public-domain ANF research texts through the Tertullian Project’s ANF contents and New Advent’s *To Scapula*; accessed 2026-07-19. The eclipse identification is a modern chronological control, not supplied as a civil date by the author.
- Tertullian. *De spectaculis*, especially 1–2, 19, and 30; *De idololatria*, especially 1, 10–19, and 24; *Ad martyras*; *Scorpiace*; and *De fuga in persecutione*. Public-domain ANF research translations through *On Spectacles* and the Tertullian Project work index; accessed 2026-07-19. Different treatments of civic participation, flight, martyrdom, and service are not assigned one date merely to remove their tension.
- Tertullian. *De corona*, especially 3–4, 6, and 11. Public-domain ANF research translation, New Advent; accessed 2026-07-19. Used for baptismal and daily customs, unwritten tradition, and the military-service argument; not treated as a universal service book.
- Tertullian. *De baptismo*, especially 1, 3–8, 13, 15–20. Public-domain ANF research translation, New Advent; accessed 2026-07-19. Compare Ernest Evans, ed. and trans., *Tertullian’s Homily on Baptism* (London: SPCK, 1964), a copyrighted critical edition used through paraphrase. The reported Asian-presbyter episode is not represented as extant minutes.
- Tertullian. *De oratione*, especially 1, 6, 23, and 25–29. Public-domain ANF research translation, New Advent; accessed 2026-07-19. Used by locus for the Lord’s Prayer, Eucharistic bread, posture, hours, psalmody, and spiritual sacrifice.
- Tertullian. *De paenitentia*, especially 1 and 4–10; and *De patientia*, especially 1. Public-domain ANF research translations through *On Repentance* and the work index; accessed 2026-07-19. The early provision for post-baptismal repentance is read against, not silently harmonized with, *On Modesty*.
- Tertullian. *Ad uxorem*, books 1–2, especially 1.1–7 and 2.2–8. Public-domain ANF research translation, New Advent; accessed 2026-07-19. The addressed marriage establishes that the author had a wife; the ideal of 2.8 does not establish the details of their household.
- Tertullian. *De cultu feminarum*, especially 1.1–3 and book 2; and *De virginibus velandis*, especially 1, 9, and 17. Public-domain ANF research translations, *On the Apparel of Women* and *On the Veiling of Virgins*; accessed 2026-07-19. For critical text and commentary, compare Marie Turcan, ed. and trans., *Tertullien: La toilette des femmes*, SC 173 (Paris: Cerf, 1971), and Vincent Bulhart, ed., *De virginibus velandis*, CSEL 76 (Vienna: Hölder-Pichler-Tempsky, 1957). The latter controls the third-person closing name “Septimius Tertullianus.” Gendered rhetoric, ministry restrictions, developing discipline, and transmitted name attribution are kept distinct.
- Tertullian. *De exhortatione castitatis*, especially 7–8; *De monogamia*, especially 1–3 and 11–12; and *De ieiunio adversus psychicos*. Public-domain ANF research translations, *Exhortation to Chastity*, *On Monogamy*, and the work index; accessed 2026-07-19. Used as a developing sequence rather than one undated sexual or fasting ethic.
- Tertullian. *De pudicitia*, especially 1, 10, and 20–21. Public-domain ANF research translation, New Advent; accessed 2026-07-19. Compare Bradley K. Storin and Ellen Muehlberger, “Tertullian of Carthage, *On Repentance* and *On Modesty* 1–4, 21–22”, in *The Cambridge Edition of Early Christian Writings* (Cambridge University Press, online 2025), accessed 2026-07-19. The unnamed edict is not assigned to Callistus as fact.
- Tertullian. *De praescriptione haereticorum*, especially 7, 13, 19–21, 32, and 36. Public-domain ANF research translation, New Advent; accessed 2026-07-19. *Adversus omnes haereses*, appended in part of the tradition, is excluded from Tertullian’s authentic voice.
- Tertullian. *Adversus Marcionem*, books 1–5, especially 1.1, 1.3–5, 2.4, 3, 4.19, 4.40, and the scriptural sequences of books 4–5. Public-domain ANF research translations, book 1, book 2, book 3, book 4, and book 5; accessed 2026-07-19. Compare Ernest Evans, ed. and trans., *Tertullian: Adversus Marcionem*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972). Protected modern English is paraphrased; Tertullian’s hostile reconstruction is not treated as Marcion’s own edition.
- Tertullian. *Adversus Praxeum*, especially 1–3, 8–9, 25–30. Public-domain ANF research translation, New Advent; accessed 2026-07-19. Compare Ernest Evans, ed. and trans., *Tertullian’s Treatise against Praxeas* (London: SPCK,

1948), and the current Cambridge selection; accessed 2026-07-19. Latin technical terms are treated in their pre-Nicene semantic range.

- Tertullian. *De carne Christi*, especially 5, 17–23. Public-domain ANF research translation, New Advent; accessed 2026-07-19. Compare Ernest Evans, ed. and trans., *Tertullian's Treatise on the Incarnation* (London: SPCK, 1956), and the Cambridge selection; accessed 2026-07-19. The anti-docetic paradox is quoted by locus, not through the false *credo quia absurdum* maxim.
- Tertullian. *De resurrectione carnis*, especially 1, 8, and 63. Public-domain ANF research translation, New Advent; accessed 2026-07-19. Compare Ernest Evans, ed. and trans., *Tertullian's Treatise on the Resurrection* (London: SPCK, 1960). The brief Latin at 8.2 is public domain; modern commentary is paraphrased.
- Tertullian. *De anima*, especially 5–9, 19–27, and 39–41. Public-domain ANF research translation, New Advent; accessed 2026-07-19. Compare J. H. Waszink, ed., *Quinti Septimi Florentis Tertulliani De anima* (Amsterdam: Meulenhoff, 1947). The visionary report and the ontological conclusion drawn from it remain separate.
- Tertullian. *Adversus Iudaeos*, especially 1–8 and the disputed, overlapping chapters 9–14. Compare Hermann Tränkle, ed., *Q. S. F. Tertulliani Adversus Iudaeos: mit Einleitung und kritischem Kommentar* (Wiesbaden: Steiner, 1964). Work history and bibliography through the Tertullian Project dossier; accessed 2026-07-19. Unity and authorship of the final portion remain qualified, and polemical “Jews” are not treated as ethnographic description.

B.2 Contemporary setting and ancient reception

- *The Acts of the Scillitan Martyrs*, Latin and English in Herbert Musurillo, ed. and trans., *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), pp. 86–89. Used for the Carthaginian trial of 17 July 180 and the Latin African Christian setting; protected translation is paraphrased.
- *The Passion of Saints Perpetua and Felicity*. Critical historical control through Thomas J. Heffernan, *The Passion of Perpetua and Felicity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), publisher record. Used for the 202/203 Carthaginian martyr context and the limits of the Tertullian editorship hypothesis; no protected wording is reproduced.
- Eusebius of Caesarea. *Ecclesiastical History* 2.2.4–6, trans. Arthur Cushman McGiffert, in NPNF, second series, vol. 1, New Advent; accessed 2026-07-19. Used for the Greek *Apologeticum*, reputation, and knowledge of Roman law; it does not establish professional employment.
- Eusebius of Caesarea. *Ecclesiastical History* 5.16–19, trans. Arthur Cushman McGiffert, in NPNF, second series, vol. 1, New Advent; accessed 2026-07-19. Used for the earliest substantial anti-New-Prophecy dossier, including excerpts from an anonymous disputant, Apollonius, Serapion, and related letters. Its proximity to the Asian controversy is retained together with its hostile selection, fragmentary survival, and Eusebian mediation.
- Lactantius. *Divine Institutes* 5.1 and 5.4, public-domain ANF translation, New Advent; accessed 2026-07-19. Used for early praise and criticism of Tertullian's learning, advocacy, and style.
- Jerome. *On Illustrious Men* 53, Latin and research translation with source notes; accessed 2026-07-19. Every component—name, father, presbyterate, Roman envy, New Prophecy breach, Cyprian anecdote, and old age—is treated as a distinct late report rather than an indivisible life.
- Jerome. *Against Helvidius* 19, public-domain NPNF translation, New Advent; accessed 2026-07-19. Used for Jerome's selective distancing of Tertullian in the Marian controversy, not as an independent witness to Mary's household.
- Cyprian of Carthage. *On the Dress of Virgins, On the Advantage of Patience, On the Unity of the Catholic Church*, and selected letters, in CCSL 3–3C and public-domain ANF research translations through the New Advent Cyprian index; accessed 2026-07-19. Used for literary reception and a distinct African episcopal response, not personal contact with Tertullian.
- Augustine of Hippo. *De haeresibus* 86, Latin and English research text, the Tertullianists dossier; accessed 2026-07-19. Used for the fifth-century group and basilica transfer; not backdated into a foundation act by Tertullian.
- Vincent of Lérins. *Commonitorium* 18, public-domain NPNF translation, New Advent; accessed 2026-07-19. Used as fifth-century praise and warning, not as contemporary biography.
- Pseudo-Gelasian dossier. *Decretum Gelasianum de libris recipiendis et non recipiendis*, critical study and text in Ernst von Dobschütz, *Texte und Untersuchungen* 38.4 (Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1912), especially the list of rejected writings. Used as composite reception whose papal attribution and stages are disputed.

B.3 Catholic reception actually used

- *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 228, 852, 991, 1015, 1446, 1642, 1951, 2271, 2761, 2774, 2779, 2814, and 2817, official Vatican English through the Catechism index; accessed 2026-07-19. Particular Tertullian citations are evidence of selective Catholic reception, not a declaration about his whole corpus.
- Benedict XVI. General Audience, 30 May 2007, “Tertullian”; accessed 2026-07-19. Used as official papal catechesis on his Latin theological contribution and rigorist isolation. Its biographical cautions and devotional purpose remain visible.

B.4 Modern historical and theological controls

- Barnes, Timothy D. *Tertullian: A Historical and Literary Study*, 2nd ed. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985. Foundational modern revision of the life, chronology, legal-career assumptions, and corpus; used as a named reconstruction, not an ancient source.
- Rankin, David. *Tertullian and the Church*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995, publisher contents. Used for ecclesiology, office, separation, and the limits of the Catholic/Montanist binary.
- Osborn, Eric. *Tertullian: First Theologian of the West*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997. Used for the integrated theological architecture, reason, rule of faith, Trinity, and material creation. “First” is received as a claim about the surviving Latin corpus, not solitary invention.
- Dunn, Geoffrey D. *Tertullian*. Early Church Fathers. London and New York: Routledge, 2004, publisher record. Used for a current synthesis of life, works, Church, ethics, and reception.
- Trevett, Christine. *Montanism: Gender, Authority and the New Prophecy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996. Used to distinguish the movement’s Asian beginnings, later regional forms, women prophets, adherent claims, and hostile heresiology.
- Wilhite, David E. *Tertullian the African: An Anthropological Reading of Tertullian’s Context and Identities*. Millennium-Studien 14. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2007, open-access record. Used as an influential postcolonial reconstruction whose ethnicity and resistance claims remain debated rather than biographical fact.
- Burns, J. Patout, Jr., and Robin M. Jensen. *Christianity in Roman Africa: The Development of Its Practices and Beliefs*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014. Used for the urban, ritual, martyr, and ecclesial context; regional patterns are not assigned automatically to Tertullian.
- Lieu, Judith M. *Marcion and the Making of a Heretic: God and Scripture in the Second Century*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015. Used to control the difference between Tertullian’s adversarial Marcion and a modern reconstruction from multiple witnesses.
- Secord, Jared. “Tertullian, *Apology* 21,” in *The Cambridge Edition of Early Christian Writings*, Cambridge chapter record (online 2022); accessed 2026-07-19. Used for the compact c. 170 birth and c. 196–212 literary career reconstruction and for current apologetic context; alternative ranges remain stated.
- Storin, Bradley K., and Ellen Muehlberger. “Tertullian of Carthage, *On Repentance* and *On Modesty* 1–4, 21–22,” in *The Cambridge Edition of Early Christian Writings*, Cambridge chapter record (online 2025); accessed 2026-07-19. Used for current treatment of repentance, absolution, community, and the relation of the two works; protected translation is not reproduced.
- Binder, Stéphanie E. *Tertullian and the Jews in Early Christian Literary Imagination*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2026, publisher record; introduction also checked through the publisher excerpt; accessed 2026-07-19. Used for the variable rhetorical production of Jewish figures and current life-range orientation; unseen portions carry no claim.
- Braun, René. *Deus Christianorum: Recherches sur le vocabulaire doctrinal de Tertullien*. 2nd ed. Paris: Institut d’études augustiniennes, 1977. Used to control theological vocabulary as developing Latin semantics rather than later conciliar definitions.
- Waszink, J. H., and J. C. M. van Winden, eds. *Tertullianus: De idololatria*. Supplements to Vigiliae Christianae 1. Leiden: Brill, 1987. Used for critical context on civic and occupational separation; protected translation and commentary are paraphrased.

B.5 Manuscripts, editions, and textual boundaries

- Bibliothèque nationale de France, MS Latin 13047, *Opuscula et carmina*, late eighth century, official BnF catalog record and Gallica scan from the original manuscript; accessed 2026-07-19. The fragment of *Adversus Iudaeos* 6–9 at fols. 29v–40v is the earliest surviving Tertullian item located in this audit. Its late date, truncation, and catalog attribution do not settle the work’s composition or chapters 9–14.
- Bibliothèque nationale de France, MS Latin 1622, the Codex Agobardinus, ninth century, official BnF catalog record and Gallica digitization; accessed 2026-07-19. Used as an official material control for a substantial but mutilated corpus witness and for the distinction between its historical collection and surviving leaves.
- Troyes, Médiathèque Jacques-Chirac, MS 523, late twelfth century, BnF Catalogue collectif de France inventory and IRHT/CNRS ARCA record and scan; accessed 2026-07-19. The codex is the sole extant representative of the Trecense family and carries five Tertullian works. The catalogs’ 208/210-folio discrepancy and the migrated catalog’s attribution limits remain open; family survival is not made a codex-unicus claim for every work.
- The Tertullian Project, “The Manuscripts of Tertullian”; accessed 2026-07-19. Used as a manuscript-family and bibliography finding aid for the independent *Apologeticum*, Cluniacense, Agobardinum, Trecense, Corbeienne, and excerpt traditions. Individual claims were limited to the dossier’s documented scope; the private project is not treated as an official catalog or critical edition.
- The Tertullian Project, critical-edition index, spurious-works audit, and lost-works audit; accessed 2026-07-19. Used to route work-specific edition checks and to avoid turning variable counts or old attributions into fixed corpus facts.
- Dekkers, Eligius, et al., eds. *Tertulliani Opera*, parts 1–2. CCSL 1–2. Turnhout: Brepols, 1954. Publisher record for CCSL 1; accessed 2026-07-19. Each treatise’s editor, witnesses, and later re-editions remain work-specific; the volumes are not described as one uniform collation.
- Sources Chrétiennes. Work-specific Tertullian critical editions and French translations in the series catalog. Used where available to check introductions, textual history, and modern work boundaries; protected translations are paraphrased and no series-wide superiority is assumed.
- Vetus Latina Institute. *Vetus Latina Database and manuscript research environment*, official portal; accessed 2026-07-19. Used to control the claim that Tertullian is an important Old Latin witness while free citation, translation, and memory prevent reconstruction of one personal Bible from isolated verses.

B.6 Translation and reuse boundary

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